



## **Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence**

### **Podcast Transcript**

**Season 3 Episode 6: April 21, 2021**

### **Breaking the Silence & Telling Your Story**

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and Nouchee, Dual Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Advocate

NOUCHEE: Hello and welcome to The Women's Center's Wednesday Workshop, a podcast that shares helpful insight for survivors, community members, and service providers alike. The Women's Center is based out of Waukesha, Wisconsin. We welcome and serve survivors of all ages, races, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, nationalities, and immigration statuses. The mission of The Women's Center is to provide safety, shelter, and support to empower all impacted by domestic abuse, sexual violence, child abuse, and trafficking. Each episode will feature instruction on healing topic. Today, our topic is Breaking the Silence and Telling Your Story. We are your hosts, my name is Nouchee, and I'm the Dual Domestic Abuse/Sexual Violence Advocate here at The Women's Center.

MARISSA: And I am Marissa, I am in the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate with The Women's Center. April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. During April, Sexual Assault Awareness Month (or SAAM) is a focused time to empower survivors by bringing awareness, promoting prevention, and inspiring change.

Sexual assault is pervasive in our community and affects people of all genders and all ages. Nearly one in three women and one in 6 men in the United States have experienced rape or attempted rape at some point in their lives. However, rape is the most underreported crime; 63% of sexual assaults are not reported to the police. Tragically in Wisconsin, one in 10 children will be sexually abused before the age of 18, and in eight out of 10 cases of rape, the victim knew the person who sexually assaulted them. Each year, thousands of people find safety, shelter, and support through our doors. We are the only agency of our kind in Waukesha County, and we are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. By honoring SAAM, you're adding your voice to a movement that seeks to build a more peaceful community and showing your commitment to stand with survivors.

Support from The Women's Center comes from WaterStone Bank, a community bank celebrating 100 years of service in southeastern Wisconsin. WaterStone Bank is dedicated to providing resources for youth on their journey to financial independence. Learn more about WaterStone Bank's student checking program and digital banking at [www.WSBonline.com](http://www.WSBonline.com).

**NOUCHEE:** Follow along for our upcoming events and listen to our other SAAM podcasts if you haven't already. April 28th is our virtual EmPower Luncheon. We are very excited to host Pulitzer Prize winning journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, who broke the news of Harvey Weinstein's decades of sexual assault and abuse for the New York Times. Their book, "She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement" revisits their landmark investigative reporting into sexual assault and the "complicity machine" that often surrounds it. Painstakingly researched, their account is less about Weinstein himself, and more about the structures that enabled him to thrive. Many people in his world were very aware of what he was doing--perpetuating blatant rape culture, victim shaming and blaming. Kantor and Twohey looked for answers to the question, "what does it take for victims of sexual assault and harassment to be believed?" Through this podcast we will be referencing quotes from "She Said."

Also on April 28th is Denim Day, this can be done anywhere, at any time, and you can wear denim to raise awareness. Strong trigger warning for description of rape, so please skip ahead if you need to and take care of yourself. Denim Day was created after an Italian Supreme Court dismissed a rape case after stating that the rape was consensual because the victim wore tight jeans and had to help the rapist remove them. Enraged by the verdict, within a matter of hours the woman in the Italian Parliament launched into immediate action and protested by wearing jeans to work. The first official Denim Day was in LA in April of 1999, and has continued every year since developing into an international movement.

All April we will have virtual toolkits available on our website. In addition, we have a new Spotify playlist this month. Music can be one of the most important tools out there, and we want to use playlists to help us all #CancelRapeCulture, and break the silence of sexual assault and abuse. Trigger warning: these songs may include references to abuse, so listen only as it remains helpful to you. This playlist as well all the links are on this playlist, as well as the links to all of our other events will be on our website.

**MARISSA:** So in our previous episode, we discussed how abusers use shame as a tool to exert power and control, and silence survivors from telling their story. For many people who have experienced abuse, the resulting trauma will often manifest as a reflection of ourselves or our worth. Shame starts to set in, we may believe that the abuse was our fault, and we may feel shame that the abuse happened in the first place.

NOUCHEE: Sometimes in situations where accountability hasn't been taken—an abuser may say we made them mad, that they had consent, or that they lost control—we often try to take on that accountability in order to find closure. We may end up carrying our abuser's responsibility, rationale, excuses, and internalize them into shame. The abuser is the one that needs to take accountability for their actions; abuse is never your fault, and that is their baggage, 100%. We can work to find closure through grieving our past, processing our current emotions, and working to move forward. Ask yourself, are you carrying someone else's baggage for them? Is the shame yours to bear? And can you lighten the load? Be kind to yourself, and let go of the shame that you're holding.

MARISSA: So with that, there are many things that may drive a survivor of abuse to keep their story to themselves. So that shame can be really difficult to let go of sometimes. We may also keep our stories to ourselves because of safety concerns, confusion about what happened, distrust, fear of not being believed, or fears of being questioned. Or, you might not be ready yet, and all of these are valid. To echo Nouchée's point, self-compassion is a powerful tool to dismantle shame. Reflect on times when compassion or empathy were given to you or by you. You can try to write a self-compassionate letter to yourself, or try to flip the script, to what would you say to a friend if they were in this situation. Try to be as kind to yourself as you would to a good friend.

NOUCHEE: When telling your story, some may question if it is their right to expose their abuser. However, what happened to you is a part of your experience and your story. It is your right to share this in spaces where you feel safe to do so and with whom you want to share it with. This does not mean you are unfairly exposing your abuser. You may have heard recently about "cancel culture," or the practice of ostracizing or boycotting people or organizations who have been known to be harmful. Though it is meant to hold harmful people accountable, it is sometimes painted in a bad light. You're allowed to speak to your truth and your experience, you are not unfairly exposing or harming those who abused you. It was their choice to harm and abuse you and you're allowed to hold them accountable and remove them from your life. It is not your fault that the abuse happened. You have a right to tell your story, it is not your fault for how the abuser is held accountable or receives consequences for their actions. We should not be hesitant as a society to cancel rape culture and hold abusers accountable.

Reversely, keeping your story to yourself does not mean you're protecting your abuser. Who you share with, to what extent, and where and when is always up to you. Safety in sharing is necessary and you're allowed to protect and guard your truth. You are protecting a vulnerable piece of yourself; this is an act of self-love, in keeping yourself

safe and placing importance on your needs and comfort. If you feel safe for sharing your story without naming your abuser, that is perfectly valid.

MARISSA: So again, no one can tell you how to share your story, to whom, or how much to share, but it is yours to share when you're ready and when you want. Sharing your story may strengthen your own self-image as somebody who can reclaim their power, bring solidarity with other victim/survivors in your life, and can help shed the shame and stigma of overcoming sexual abuse. This is exactly why the #MeToo movement took off. To provide a quote from She Said, "that autumn [following the posting of the Weinstein article], women from every arena of life posted #MeToo stories on social media, coming forward in new solidarity and of their own volition. The key to change was a new sense of accountability, as women gained confidence that telling their stories would lead to action, more of them opened up." Since empathy is an antidote to shame, sharing your story and receiving empathy in return can help dissolve this painful feeling. Authentic sharing requires vulnerability, so we're going to talk about some tips you can use to share your story in a way that prioritizes your emotional safety and self-care needs.

NOUCHEE: So like Marissa said, we're going to share some tips about how to share your story. Who is safe and supportive in your life? Is that family, friends or a professional? Acknowledge what the best format is for you: do you want to share your story in-person or over the phone, do you want to share your story publicly, do you want to write it in a journal just for yourself or select few others? Keep your safety in mind. So this includes physical and emotional safety. Does that look like having this conversation in a safe place, in a public space, in a place that you feel comfortable? And also emotional safety, so preparing yourself emotionally before and afterwards, having coping strategies on-hand to use if you feel overwhelmed.

Decide how much or how little you feel comfortable sharing. How much detail you disclose is up to you, and it can vary with the person and place we are in healing. Clarify what you expect ahead of time: perhaps you ask a friend to just listen and not offer advice, or you request that the person not try to talk you out of what you're feeling. Feeling heard is important. It's okay to ask your support people what you need during this disclosure. Is this something your support people can check in with you about and see how you're doing in the future, or would you like to have this conversation only when you bring it up? And again, these things can change depending on where you are in your healing journey. Set boundaries: you have no obligation to answer questions you don't feel comfortable with, or take any advice that you may be given.

MARISSA: Also recognize that we can't control other people's reactions, and I know this is easier said than done. It can be devastating when we get a negative reaction to telling

our stories, and it's okay to name that and process through these feelings with a safe individual. Know that their reaction is not a reflection on you, it's a reflection on them. Their reaction does not make your story any less valid or any less believable, you do not have to prove your experiences to anyone. Even if you're not believed publicly or within a system such as the legal system or criminal justice system, know that we believe you and support is available.

It is so important to practice self-care, so thinking about things that make you feel safe and grounded before, during, and after. Practice compassionate affirmations that allow you to reflect or meditate on words that you have longed to hear, things like "you are worthy, you are kind, you are smart," and so on, whatever fits for you. Be sure to celebrate your courage, too; there is so much bravery and vulnerability, and it takes a lot to decide to share your story. We are so, so proud of you for doing this work. Remember that language is important. You may identify as a survivor or a victim. This is why we often use both terms when describing somebody who has experienced abuse.

I'm going to give some examples of definitions people may have for these terms, but again, it's all up to you. Someone may identify a survivor as somebody who has survived trauma. Somebody may define a victim as being harmed by somebody and the victimization not being your fault. You may want other terms as well, like thriver, warrior, free woman (or man or person, however you identify.) And the beauty of it is nobody else gets to label you for you, or label your experience for you. Doing that for yourself is what helps you reclaim your power.

**NOUCHEE:** In owning your experience, you're acknowledging the power of your truth and the impact that abuse has had. You are shedding the shame of someone else's choice, you are refusing to carry the ownership and responsibility of someone else's choice to abuse you. You are giving them back what is theirs to carry, and you might feel that a weight has been lifted off your shoulders. In sharing your story, you join a courageous community of survivors who are no longer suffering in silence. A quote from She Said that reflects this is "everyone wanted company in sharing, and understandably so." You reclaim your voice, and you may eventually feel proud and strong. Some victim/survivors have used music to reclaim their voice. Some of our favorite songs that illustrate this are Quiet by Milck, and Say It by War On Women. Like I mentioned earlier, we also have a new Spotify playlist with more songs that share a similar message.

Remember, it's okay to share your vulnerabilities and growth, even if it is just to yourself. Sharing your story is not a race; you can choose to disclose whenever you want, and it does not matter how long ago the abuse or assault happened. We believe you regardless. You are the only one that can define your experiences and identity, and remember that your voice has power. A quote from She Said that reflects this is that "the woman around the room leaped in with expressions of support. 'If you decide to come

forward, that's a big step and a step of growth, no matter how long it took you to say anything about it."

MARISSA: Regardless of if you've experienced abuse or not, we can all work to support survivors. One of the most important things is to not blame survivors. Most often, like we've illustrated, survivors have already blamed themselves or may have had blame placed on them. Do not question survivors about the past or their behaviors, they did what they had to do to survive and be here today. It's important to have conversations with survivors. Stigma can make abuse scary to talk about, but refusing to talk about abuse can reinforce these stigmas and shame. To provide a quote from She Said, "sexual harassment was often rumored, rarely revealed. Sadly, shamefully, very few of us had the courage or wherewithal to confront it." And that said, do not force a survivor to talk about or share more information about the abuse, just make it safe for the topic to come up if they're ready.

Another way we can all support survivors to is to continue to think bigger. We can always have more conversations in our society about breaking the shame. These conversations let survivors know that they're not alone and that we are all aware that abuse is happening, and that we all have a stake in ending abuse.

NOUCHEE: Thank you for joining us to learn more about Breaking the Silence and Telling your Story. Our next episode will be about Self-Worth and Motivation. Thank you to WaterStone Bank for their support of Sexual Assault Awareness Month and the mission of The Women's Center.

The Women's Center focuses our work in partnering with clients to overcome barriers and gain a life free from violence. Our work is grounded in equity, upheld by inclusion, accountability, self-reflection, and continual growth. We believe that it is important for survivors to feel seen and heard. We believe that Black Lives Matter because we cannot end violence without addressing the distinct injustices that Black and Indigenous People of Color face. We know that all forms of oppression are ultimately connected, and when we center individuals most impacted, we are also supporting survivors who have faced any form of violence. While we are not experts in anti-racism work, we aspire to be allies in this movement. We all have a responsibility to contribute to unlearning racism and intersecting forms of oppression that take place in our communities.

If you like to talk with an advocate about your own experience with abuse, please call our 24-hour hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's Center at [www.twcwaukesha.org](http://www.twcwaukesha.org), and find the resources mentioned on this episode by clicking "Resources," then "Podcasts" on our website. Thank you and be well.